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ABSTRACT

A study identified the needs expressed by home economics teachers regarding middle-level education to provide a baseline from which to work toward development and implementation of a middle school home economics curriculum in North Dakota. A review of the literature isolated specific characteristics generally accepted as unique to developmentally appropriate middle-level education. These characteristics were categorized into three groups: school organization, instructional format, and teacher competencies. A survey using a Likert scale was developed and completed by all home economics teachers attending a statewide conference (over 90% of all home economics teachers in the state). Findings indicated that home economics teachers in North Dakota agreed with many of the recommendations of middle-level educators. They responded positively to all survey items with most favorable responses identifying a clear understanding of the specific developmental needs of young adolescents followed by a general consensus of the appropriateness of various recommended teaching processes. Home economics teachers would require minimal inservice training in middle-school philosophy. Although results showed that teachers had a strong basic understanding of middle-level education, inservice training could be provided to update them on current research as it relates to the restructuring of education to meet the growing needs of young adolescents and alert them to models for middle-level education. (Contains 24 references.) (YLB)

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Home Economics Teachers: An Important Element for Transforming Middle Level Education

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Home Economics Teachers:

An Important Element for Transforming Middle Level Education

It is estimated that half our nation's youth are at serious or moderate risk of reaching adulthood unable to meet the requirements necessary to hold a job in the workforce, maintain lasting relationships in families and with friends, and accept responsibilities of participation in a democratic society (Carnegie Council, 1989; Jackson, 1991; Huelskamp, 1993). At earlier ages than in previous generations, youth today face major adjustments to rapid changes in all aspects of their developmental process while interacting with environmental forces that are increasingly risky, even life threatening.

Middle-level education is a major focus for reform and restructuring to meet the needs of these young people -- the nation's future (Capelluti & Stokes, 1991; Irvin, 1992; Whisler, 1990). Schools and programs involving all combinations of grades 5 through 9, classified as middle-level education, may well be the last best chance toward a productive and fulfilling life for many youth aged 10 to 15 (Carnegie Council, 1989). It is vital that schools provide education that addresses the personal concerns and social issues these youth face daily.

Findings of a two-year study of the Carnegie Council's Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, Turning Points (1989), identified criteria regarded as developmentally appropriate for middle-level education. They addressed educational reform in three areas: school organization, instructional format, and teacher competencies. Though their findings and recommendations are not particularly new or untested, they provide valuable pieces of information about practices that work; more importantly, when used together, they represent a radical restructuring of much current schooling practices (Jackson, 1991).

Developmental needs of young adolescents require that middle-level schools be organized into small communities for learning in which stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are considered fundamental for intellectual and personal growth. Students and teachers should be grouped together as teams, and small group advisories should be established that ensure every student becomes well known by at least one adult. Further, schools need to connect with families and the community to share opportunities and responsibility for each student's progress and success (Carnegie Council, 1989).

It is recommended that middle-level schools teach a core academic program that can produce "students who are literate, including in the sciences, and who know how to think critically, lead a healthy life, behave ethically, and assume the responsibilities of citizenship in a pluralistic society" (Carnegie Council, 1989, p. 9). Elimination of tracking by achievement level and encouraging cooperative learning promotes a student-centered curriculum and ensures success for all students, a developmentally appropriate element for young adolescents. Exploratory programs expose students to learning opportunities that can stimulate personal interests as well as a general attraction to learning (Campbell, 1991; Muth & Alvermann, 1992), and these should also be incorporated into the curricular program.

A very clear understanding of the developmental process of young adolescents helps create a sensitivity to their unique needs. Teachers of middle-level students need special training in adolescent development as well as in subject areas in order to counsel and mentor their students better (Carnegie Council, 1989). They will be able to provide a climate that supports and nurtures each individual, especially those students identified as "at risk" for success in school.

Home economics curriculum parallels that of the Carnegie Council's recommended middle-level organization and format and is considered by many to be important for the exploratory component (Campbell, 1991; Dohner & Kister, 1990;

George & Lawrence, 1982, in Muth & Alvermann, 1992; Gardner & Boix-Mansilla, 1993). Home economics curriculum at the secondary level promotes development of strong family life and community involvement skills. Teachers use methods that are interactive and collaborative, allowing all students an opportunity for success in learning while encouraging productive relationships.

Having teachers who can work effectively with the middle-level age group and the unique instructional setting required to accommodate their developmental needs is very important (Alexander & McEwin, 1989 in Whisler, 1990; Carnegie Council, 1989; Eichhorn, 1991; Jackson, 1991; Kohut, 1988; Peppard & Rottier, 1990; Rossi & Stokes, 1991; Spence, 1991; Task Force of Social Studies, 1991; Wells, 1989). Teacher education in home economics includes extensive training in understanding and dealing with the developmental process and concerns of young adolescents.

PURPOSE

Home economics teachers view classes at the middle-level as a means to promote senior high school classes as well as a way to meet the needs of students unable to enroll in secondary home economics classes. Assessing the teachers' current status of understanding and beliefs will provide a baseline from which to work toward the development and implementation of a middle-school home economics curriculum for students in North Dakota. The purpose of this study was to identify the beliefs held by home economics teachers regarding middle-level education.

PROCEDURES

A descriptive study using appropriate descriptive statistics was undertaken. A review of the literature isolated specific characteristics generally accepted as unique to developmentally appropriate middle-level education. These characteristics were categorized into the three comprehensive groups identified by the Carnegie Council

(1989): school organization, instructional format, and teacher competencies. A survey composed of 30 items was developed using a Likert scale (Refer to key on each table). A panel of experts drawn from North Dakota State University teacher education faculty reviewed and narrowed the list of items in the instrument to 25.

All home economics teachers in attendance at a statewide All Services Vocational Conference completed the survey. This encompassed over 90% of the home economics teachers in the state of North Dakota. Home economics teachers unable to attend the conference were not included in the study.

RESULTS

Overall responses to all items in the instrument were positive and indicated a basic understanding of middle school philosophy. Responses totaling 10% or less are not reported in this section; they are shown in each table, however. Significant responses in these categories would have identified a lack of understanding of basic principles of middle-level education.

Survey participants indicated positive agreement with school organization issues (See Table 1). Ninety-five percent of the teachers agreed that the decision-making process in middle schools needed to be shared between teachers, parents, administrators, and the community. In response to the need for teachers with whom young adolescents can develop comfortable, secure, interpersonal relationships, again there was a very favorable response of 98%. Finally, 90% of the respondents viewed parent and community involvement as the expected "ideal" for middle school programs.

Table 1. School Organization

Survey Item	Response	N	%	Mean	SD
Decisions need to be shared between teachers, parents, administrators, and the community.	SA	43	40.1	4.355	.567
	A	59	55.1		
	U	5	4.6		
	D	0	0.0		
	SD	0	0.0		
Young adolescents need teachers with whom they can develop comfortable, secure interpersonal relationships.	SA	58	53.7	4.518	.535
	A	48	44.4		
	U	2	1.8		
	D	0	0.0		
	SD	0	0.0		
Parent and community involvement is expected for the "ideal" middle-school program.	SA	38	35.8	4.235	.681
	A	57	53.7		
	U	9	8.4		
	D	2	1.8		
	SD	0	0.0		

Key: SA(strongly agree,A(agree),U(undecided),D(disagree),SD(strongly disagree)

Table 2. Instructional Format

Survey Item	Response	N	%	Mean	SD
Teachers are comfortable using cooperative learning as a teaching technique.	SA	24	22.8	3.961	.755
	A	56	53.3		
	U	23	21.9		
	D	1	0.9		
	SD	1	0.9		
Exploratory and mini courses should be incorporated into the basic curriculum of young adolescents	SA	37	34.5	4.280	.576
	A	63	58.8		
	U	7	6.5		
	D	0	0.0		
	SD	0	0.0		
Middle-school curriculum should be structured to be responsive to student needs.	SA	36	33.3	4.296	.549
	A	69	63.8		
	U	2	1.8		
	D	1	0.9		
	SD	0	0.0		

Key: SA(strongly agree,A(agree),U(undecided),D(disagree),SD(strongly disagree)

In the area of instructional format, 76% of the teachers indicated they were comfortable using cooperative learning as a teaching technique (See Table 2). A core curriculum including exploratory and mini courses was supported by 94% of the respondents. Middle-school curriculum structured in response to student needs was seen to be most appropriate by 97% of the respondents.

Table 3. Teacher Competencies

Survey Item	Response	N	%	Mean	SD
Middle schools should be staffed with teachers who have been trained to teach young adolescents.	SA	52	49.0	4.320	.795
	A	40	37.7		
	U	10	9.4		
	D	4	3.7		
	SD	0	0.0		
Young adolescents have developmental needs that are different from elementary school children or adolescents.	SA	56	51.8	4.500	.535
	A	50	46.2		
	U	2	1.8		
	D	0	0.0		
	SD	0	0.0		
Young adolescents generally enjoy collaboration and cooperation, not competition.	SA	32	30.1	3.990	.895
	A	50	47.1		
	U	16	1.5		
	D	7	6.6		
	SD	1	0.9		
Democratic control, not authoritarian control, is desirable for teaching young adolescents.	SA	31	29.5	4.019	.861
	A	53	50.4		
	U	14	13.3		
	D	6	5.7		
	SD	1	0.9		
Teachers would enjoy teaching with an interdisciplinary team.	SA	14	13.3	3.742	.717
	A	52	49.5		
	U	38	36.1		
	D	0	0.0		
	SD	1	0.9		

Key:SA(strongly agree,A(agree),U(undecided),D(disagree),SD(strongly disagree)

The results indicated that 87% of teachers agreed middle schools should be staffed with teachers who were specially trained to teach young adolescents (See Table 3). Ninety-eight percent of the teachers understood that young adolescents had developmental needs that were different from elementary school children or high school students. Specifically, they recognized that young adolescents generally enjoy collaboration and cooperation rather than competition in their educational experiences, with 77% agreeing to this concept. Eighty percent indicated that democratic control was more desirable than an authoritarian approach for teaching young adolescents. Finally, in assessing their thoughts about teachers teaching with an interdisciplinary team, 63% of the teachers indicated they thought teachers enjoy working with a team, 36% were undecided, however.

DISCUSSION

Home economics teachers in North Dakota hold many of the recommended beliefs of middle-level educators. Teachers responded positively to all survey items with most favorable responses identifying a clear understanding of the specific developmental needs of young adolescents followed by a general consensus of the appropriateness of various recommended teaching processes.

Considering the academic background of home economics teachers in child and adolescent development, the survey findings were not surprising. Home economics curriculum deals extensively with topics directly related to the societal concerns of today's youth, including the health-related issues of sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol use and abuse, teenage sexual activity and pregnancy, eating disorders, and general nutrition for health and fitness. Likewise, the changing family structure and its effects on family members is of utmost concern and an on-going curriculum topic. Adaptive techniques including communication skills, problem-solving skills, and stress-related coping skills are common fare to home economics

programs whose mission is to help individuals learn to live successfully as adults. These skills transfer well to an interdisciplinary curriculum format (Dohner & Kister, 1990) and are just a few examples that illustrate the appropriateness of a home economics programs for young adolescents.

Not only do home economics teachers receive training in content areas crucial to the lives of young adolescents, they have extensive knowledge of the special developmental characteristics of this age group -- a required criteria specified by the Carnegie Council's Task Force (1989). Teacher education in home economics includes a thorough study of child development from prenatal stages through adolescence, thus providing a solid background for understanding youth and working effectively in the middle grades.

As a final note, the home economics curriculum often deals with abstract concepts (e.g. relationships, self-esteem, conflict resolution), and teachers must use a variety of teaching techniques. Cooperative learning and other collaborative styles of teaching are commonly used by home economics teachers because of the nature of our curriculum, which explains the knowledge and comfort level expressed on the survey regarding this issue.

IMPLICATIONS-RECOMMENDATIONS

Home economics teachers require minimal inservice to middle-school philosophy. While survey results indicated teachers have a strong basic understanding of middle-level education, it would be worthwhile to provide inservice to update individuals on current research as it relates to the restructuring of education to meet the growing needs of young adolescents. As there is no one perfect model for middle-level education, it is also important that teachers be alerted to the models that are being shown to be effective.

Home economics teachers can provide valuable technical assistance with curriculum development appropriate to the middle-school level. Home economics teachers, by way of professional training, have more extensive knowledge of the developmental characteristics of young adolescents than most teachers and are a valuable resource for program development within their schools and communities.

It is important that home economics teachers activate their knowledge of young adolescents and middle-level education for two reasons. First, the current needs of young adolescents must be addressed before they are lost to a permanent future of illiteracy, poverty, drugs, and other inevitable situations. Teachers who are knowledgeable of this age group and the societal conditions that surround them need to help educate those who can make appropriate changes in schools. Secondly, the home economics curriculum can be very beneficial for all young adolescents because it addresses many areas of concerns and helps promote the healthy development of self-directed individuals able to function successfully as adults.

Implementation of middle-level home economics is feasible in the near future in North Dakota. As stated previously, successful middle-level programs require specially trained teachers knowledgeable of the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. This study indicates that home economics teachers in North Dakota possess this qualification and are therefore ready to proceed to the next steps; designing, adapting, and implementing the curriculum. Aggressiveness of teachers and administrators to pursue the undertaking of middle-level restructuring, combined with the urgency of implementation to meet the needs of young adolescents will, no doubt, determine the actuality of this implication.

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